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Letters

Trail Magic

Regarding your article on trail magic (Christine Woodside's "With Magic Like This, Who Needs Routine?" in Summer/Fall 2016, 67 no. 2), I can sum up my response in four words: Hike your own hike.

I feel you have somewhat overstated its impact, its reception, and even its rate of occurrence. On my Appalachian Trail thru-hike in 2013, I kept a detailed journal and recorded eighteen instances of trail magic that involved food set out for thru-hikers. This over a period of 171 days. North of the Mason–Dixon line, or about half the trail, there were a total of six, and notably one in Vermont, zero in New Hampshire, and one in Maine. Hardly the "ubiquitous" occurrence you allude to. This does not count the occasional cooler left along the side of a trail that was just as often empty or containing a couple modest snacks, or jugs of water usually left in spots where water sources were unreliable or dried up at that time. Quite welcome indeed. I recall three or maybe four times that hamburgers, hot dogs, or other meats were being grilled, and [I] would say, on a whole, there were as many wholesome foods that thru-hikers crave, like fresh fruit and vegetables, as fried chicken and junk food. Also, there were lots of cookies, chips, and sodas—exactly the things most hikers crave because they cannot carry things like this and want the calories.

Put things in perspective. That's an average of once every ten days over the course of the hike, and once every fourteen days over the second half. It always occurs at a road crossing, not on top of a mountain, so I would hardly consider it any sort of buzzkill for the hiking experience. The road crossing leads to towns where hikers go to eat at restaurants, usually the same things you seem to speak despairingly of, go to the Laundromat, and purchase food supplies for the upcoming trail section.

Let's talk about the positives of trail magic. Many thru-hikers scrape together what few dollars they can to try and complete their hike. Trail magic is a godsend to these folks. A long-distance hike can get lonely. Trail magic provides a rare opportunity to sit and rest and catch up with your fellow hikers without the added chore of tasks to complete, such as is the case at camp or in town. Long-distance hikers, as you know, live with extreme caloric deficit, near dehydration, and dietary deprivation on almost every level. When

presented with the opportunity to alleviate this, in town or at road-crossing trail magic, they take it. Christine, if you are saying that you did not do this, then you are one of a set of zero that I met on the trail. If you are saying other thru-hikers should refrain from these temptations, you would find virtually no followers. Also, those who offer trail magic often do so as a way to pay forward what was bestowed upon them or a family member who hiked before. That's what really makes it magic. It self-perpetuates.

I was struck by your characterization of the purpose of a long-distance hike. "Discomfort, challenge, loneliness, and uncertainty of whether your supplies would last until the next town." Really? That was not the purpose of my hike or anyone else's I met. It might have been yours, but that's just the thing. Everyone has their own purpose for a long-distance hike, so why would you judge everyone else against your purpose?

One observation on slackpacking. Although I myself did not slackpack, I felt no ill will toward those who chose to. It was their choice and their hike. I could not help but think that whoever did raise any objection felt that the very notion of slackpacking was "not fair" and somehow cheapened their own effort. Again, very self-centered and judgmental. What matter is it of yours? Why write an editorial criticizing it (thinly veiled as some sort of concern for these people and the integrity of their hike)? To me it comes across as self-righteous.

—Chris Laganos, *Sugar Hill, New Hampshire*

Sierra Club Founder David Brower

For sixteen years after his death, my father, David Brower, has been receiving his subscription to *Appalachia*, a magazine he much enjoyed in life. (Issues will continue to come to the family house, I hope, unless I have blown it with this letter.)

In David Brower's posthumous copy of the Winter/Spring 2017 issue (68 no. 1), I read and enjoyed David Leff's review of Robert Wyss's book *The Man Who Built the Sierra Club: A Life of David Brower*. I have not read the Wyss book, but much of what he writes, as relayed by Leff, seems on target. A few old myths get perpetuated.

Leff (or Wyss) reports that as part of a compromise in a successful effort to kill two dams proposed for Dinosaur National Monument, David Brower "agreed to the much larger Glen Canyon Dam downstream." Untrue. The executive committee of the Sierra Club board agreed to that dam, not my

father, who was staunchly opposed to compromise. He believed he could kill all four dams of the Colorado River Storage Project. On the eve of the vote, he was in Washington marshaling votes when the Sierra Club executive committee sent a telegram instructing him to withdraw opposition to Glen Canyon Dam.

My father felt guilt, but not for compromising. He felt guilty for not flying a red-eye home to San Francisco to argue.

Wyss (by way of Leff) argues that the “exhibit format” books my father created with Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and other great nature photographers “diverted resources for advocacy.” Those books WERE advocacy. They also brought throngs of people into the movement and were a principal reason the Sierra Club membership grew from 7,000 to 70,000 on his watch.

That my father was a “poor financial manager” is correct. It was deliberate. He didn’t care about the bottom line; he cared about saving wilderness and the planet. In that effort, he didn’t mind dipping into the red. He was stubborn, for sure, but other adjectives in the Wyss appraisal, “abrasive, hostile, intemperate, reckless,” could not be more wildly off the mark.

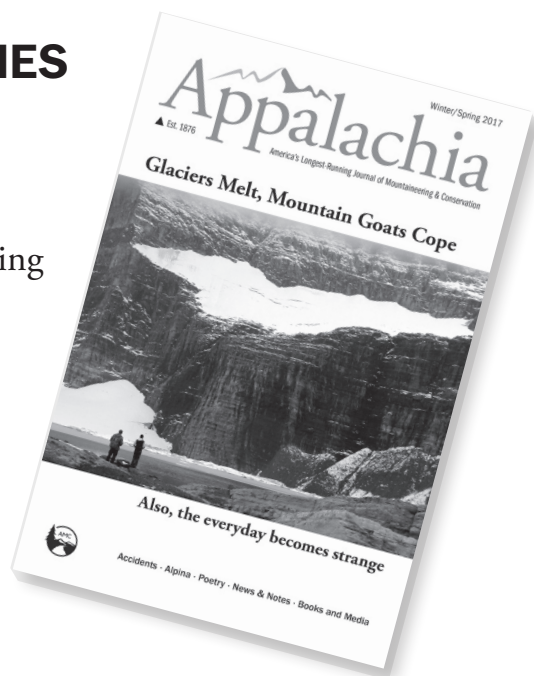
—Ken Brower, *Berkeley, California*

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